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The Book Shelf

DR. JOHN BROWN AND THE ACCOUNT OF AILIE'S OPERATION

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> Knowledge and wisdom, far from being one, have oft-times no connection. Knowledge dwells in heads replete with thoughts of other men; Wisdom in minds attentive to their own. Knowledge is proud, that he has learnt so much; Wisdom is humble, that he knows no more.
>
> WILLIAM COWPER, *The Task*

THE ATTRIBUTES of knowledge and wisdom referred to by Cowper were a happy union in the person of Dr. John Brown, one of Scotland's most beloved surgeons of the last century. The year 1961 marked the one hundredth anniversary of the American edition of a series of his essays. This article commemorates and pays tribute to the man and to his writings.

MINTO HOUSE HOSPITAL

John Brown was born in Lanark, Scotland, on 22 September 1810 into a family which included several outstanding physicians. He pursued his medical studies at Edinburgh, where his preceptor was the illustrious James Syme.

It appears that Syme had quarreled with Robert Liston, then a high priest in the British surgical hierarchy, and, as a consequence was denied the post of Chief Surgeon at the Royal Infirmary. Syme was, therefore, forced to perform most of his operations in patients' homes. However, as his reputation grew and his practice increased, the unsuitability of such surroundings for surgical procedures became felt more keenly. Accordingly, Syme conceived the bold innovation of founding his own clinic. His plan was borne to fruition by the conversion, in 1829, of an old mansion called Minto House into a surgical hospital.

Afterward, a reconciliation was effected between Liston and Syme; but, in the interim, the latter's small, makeshift hospital had come to rival the venerable Royal Infirmary itself. It was at Minto House Hospital, in 1830, that young John Brown served his medical apprenticeship. Almost 30 years later he immortalized the institution in his very first essay, *Rab and His Friends*.

PUBLICATIONS

Brown's pristine expression of his love for dogs has seldom been surpassed in literature. His compositions abounded with interspersed observations and pithy advice regarding dogs. It was out of commiseration for a mastiff called Rab, to whom he had been attached during clinical clerkship, that Brown was inspired to write his most famous monograph.

When *Rab and His Friends* was published, the reviewers judged it, all things considered, as the most perfect prose narrative since Charles Lamb's *Rosamond Gray*. The booksellers were harassed in trying to supply the avalanche of requests for copies which followed. To satisfy the great demand for more of his literary creations, Brown began to write on a variety of subjects,

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ranging from biographical sketches to critical analyses of art and science. A collection of more than 20 of his articles was printed in Edinburgh in 1859 as *Horae Subsecivae*, a title that may be loosely translated as "Idle Hours." The book became immensely popular throughout the British Isles.

Brown's book attained such popularity that it was published in the United States 2 years after its initial appearance. The title was changed to *Spare Hours*, with the author's sanction. Although he had a very busy surgical practice, Brown's literary contributions continued in the form of almost 40 more dissertations. His third book was dedicated to the memory of Abraham Lincoln, "who through faith subdued kingdoms, and wrought righteousness."

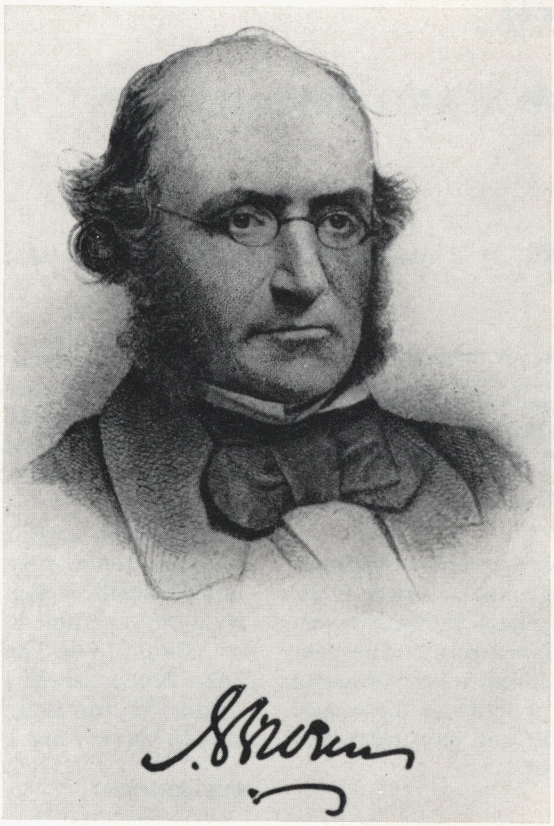


FIG. 1. John Brown, M.D., whose *Rab and His Friends* and other essays stirred and delighted several generations of physicians. Reproduced from cover insert of *Spare Hours*, 2nd series. Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1861.

CHARACTERISTICS OF BROWN'S WRITINGS

There are several features of Brown's publications which the years have not blurred and of which the medical profession may well be proud. It is difficult to find any suitable parallel to the limpidity and absolute sincerity of his style. His philosophy was not entirely homespun but, rather, was based on a solid foundation of wide and diversified learning. Again, whether he discussed the trials and tribulations of a patient or made a plea for a shelter to house stray animals, he did so with an unmistakable blend of knowledge and wisdom. He was no soap-box orator; and he arrested attention not by shrill cries, but by the subdued and firm tones of someone who had something to say that was worth listening to. Undoubtedly, the most salient features of his style were the golden threads of character, compassion, and humor which pervaded his works.

AILIE'S OPERATION

It is difficult to select an appropriate sample from Brown's essays to exemplify the scope and nature of his varied interests. The one we have chosen is from "Rab." It is still probably the best known of all, and relates the performance of a mastectomy when Brown was staying at Minto House Hospital. The surgeon alluded to in this passage was Syme. The operation was performed during an era of surgical endeavor when anesthesia and antisepsis were in the realm of the future.

It is indeed difficult not to be moved by this humane and subtle account of the terrible tragedy that befell the gentle, simple woman named Ailie Noble:

> One fine October afternoon, I was leaving the hospital, when I saw the large gate open, and in walked Rab, with that great and easy saunter of his. He looked as if taking general possession of the place; like the Duke of Wellington entering a subdued city, satiated with victory and peace. After him came Jess, now white from age, with her cart; and in it a woman, carefully wrapped up,—the carrier leading the horse anxiously, and looking back. When he saw me, James (for his name was James Noble) made a curt and grotesque "boo," and said, "Maister John, this is the mistress; she's got a trouble in her breest—some kind o' an income we're thinking."
>
> By this time I saw the woman's face; she was sitting on a sack filled with straw, her husband's plaid round her, and his big-coat with its large white metal buttons over her feet.
>
> I never saw a more unforgettable face—pale, serious, lonely, delicate, sweet, without being at all what we call fine. She looked sixty, and had on a mutch, white as snow, with its black ribbon; her silvery,

smooth hair setting off her dark-gray eyes—eyes such as one sees only twice or thrice in a lifetime, full of suffering, full also of the overcoming of it; her eyebrows black and delicate, and her mouth firm, patient, and contented, which few mouths ever are.

As I have said, I never saw a more beautiful countenance, or one more subdued to settled quiet. "Ailie," said James, "this is Maister John, the young doctor; Rab's freend, ye ken. We often speak aboot you, doctor." She smiled, and made a movement, but said nothing; and prepared to come down, putting her plaid aside and rising. Had Solomon, in all his glory, been handing down the Queen of Sheba at his palace gate, he could not have done it more daintily, more tenderly, more like a gentleman, than did James the Howgate carrier, when he lifted down Ailie his wife. The contrast of his small, swarthy, weather-beaten, keen, worldly face to hers—pale, subdued, and beautiful—was something wonderful. Rab looked on concerned and puzzled, but ready for anything that might turn up,—were it to strangle the nurse, the porter, or even me. Ailie and he seemed great friends.

"As I was sayin' she's got a kind o' trouble in her breest, doctor; will ye tak' a look at it?" We walked into the consulting-room, all four; Rab grim and comic, willing to be happy and confidential if cause could be shown, willing also to be the reverse, on the same terms. Ailie sat down, undid her open gown and her lawn handkerchief round her neck, and without a word, showed me her right breast. I looked at and examined it carefully,—she and James watching me, and Rab eyeing all three. What could I say? There it was, what had once been so soft, so shapely, so white, so gracious and bountiful, so "full of all blessed conditions,"—hard as a stone, a center of horrid pain, making that pale face with its gray, lucid, reasonable eyes, and its sweet resolved mouth, express the full measure of suffering overcome. Why was that gentle, modest, sweet woman, clean and lovable, condemned by God to bear such a burden?

I got her away to bed. "May Rab and me bide?" said James. "You may; and Rab, if he will behave himself." "I'se warrant he's do that, doctor," and in slank the faithful beast. I wish you could have seen him. There are no such dogs now. He belonged to a lost tribe. . . .

Next day, my master, the surgeon, examined Ailie. There was no doubt it must kill her, and soon. It could be removed—it might never return—it would give her speedy relief—she should have it done. She curtsied, looked at James, and said, "When?" "Tomorrow," said the kind surgeon—a man of few words. She and James and Rab and I retired. I noticed that he and she spoke little, but seemed to anticipate everything in each other. The following day, at noon, the students came in, hurrying up the great stair. At the first landing-place, on a small well-known blackboard was a bit of paper fastened by wafers, and many remains of old wafers beside it. On the paper were the words, "An operation today. J.B., *Clerk*."

Up ran the youths, eager to secure good places: in they crowded, full of interest and talk. "What's the case?" "Which side is it?"

Don't think them heartless; they are neither better nor worse than you or I; they get over their professional horrors, and into their proper work—and in them pity—as an emotion, ending in itself or at best in tears and a long-drawn breath, lessens, while pity as a motive, is quickened, and gains power and purpose. It is well for poor human nature that it is so.

The operating theater is crowded; much talk and fun, and all the cordiality and stir of youth. The surgeon with his staff of assistants is there. In comes Ailie: one look at her quiets and abates the eager students. That beautiful old woman is too much for them; they sit down, and are dumb, and gaze at her. These rough boys feel the power of her presence. She walks in quickly, but without haste; dressed in her mutch, her neckerchief, her white dimity short-gown, her black bombazine petticoat, showing her white worsted stockings and her carpet-shoes. Behind her was James with Rab. James sat down in the distance, and took that huge and noble head between his knees. Rab looked perplexed and dangerous; forever cocking his ear and dropping it fast.

Ailie stepped up on a seat, and laid herself on the table, as her friend the surgeon told her; arranged herself, gave a rapid look at James, shut her eyes, rested herself on me, and took my hand. The operation was at once begun; it was necessarily slow; and chloroform—one of God's best gifts to his suffering children—was then unknown. The surgeon did his work. The pale face showed its pain, but was still and silent. Rab's soul was working within him; he saw that something strange was going on,—blood flowing from his mistress, and she suffering; his ragged ear was up, and importunate; he growled and gave now and then a sharp impatient yelp; he would have liked to have done something to that man. But James had him firm, and gave him a glower from time to time, and an intimation of a possible kick;—all the better for James, it kept his eye and his mind off Ailie.

It is over: she is dressed, steps gently and decently down from the table, looks for James; then, turning to the surgeon and the students, she curtsies,—and in a low, clear voice, begs their pardon if she has behaved ill. The students—all of us—wept like children; the surgeon wrapped her up carefully,—and, resting on James and me, Ailie went to her room, Rab following. We put her to bed. James took off his heavy shoes, crammed with tackets, heel-capt and toe-capt, and put them carefully under the table, saying, "Maister John, I'm for nane o' yer strynge nurse bodies for Ailie. I'll be her nurse, and on my stockin' soles I'll gang about as canny as pussy." And so he did; and handy and clever, and swift and tender as any woman, was that horny-handed, snell, peremptory little man. Everything she got he gave her: he seldom slept: and often I saw his small, shrewd eyes out of the darkness, fixed on her. As before, they spoke little. . . .

For some days Ailie did well. The wound healed "by the first intention"; as James said, "Oor Ailie's skin's ower clean to beil." The students came in quiet and anxious, and surrounded her bed. She said she liked to see their young, honest faces. The surgeon dressed her, and spoke to her in his own short kind way, pitying her through his eyes. Rab and James outside the circle,—Rab being now reconciled, and

even cordial, and having made up his mind that as yet nobody required worrying, but, as you may suppose, *semper paratus*.

So far well: but, four days after the operation, my patient had a sudden and long shivering, a "groofin," as she called it. I saw her soon after; her eyes were too bright, her cheek colored; she was restless, and ashamed of being so; the balance was lost; mischief had begun. On looking at the wound, a blush of red told the secret: her pulse was rapid, her breathing anxious and quick, she wasn't herself, as she said, and was vexed at her restlessness. We tried what we could. James did everything, was everywhere; never in the way, never out of it; Rab subsided under the table into a dark place, and was motionless, all but his eye, which followed everyone. Ailie got worse; began to wander in her mind, gently; was more demonstrative in her ways to James, rapid in her questions, and sharp at times. He was vexed, and said, "She was never that way afore; no, never." For a time she knew her head was wrong, and was always asking our pardon—the dear, gentle old woman; then delirium set in strong, without pause. Her brain gave way, and that terrible spectacle,

> "The intellectual power, through words and things,
> went sounding on its dim and perilous way";

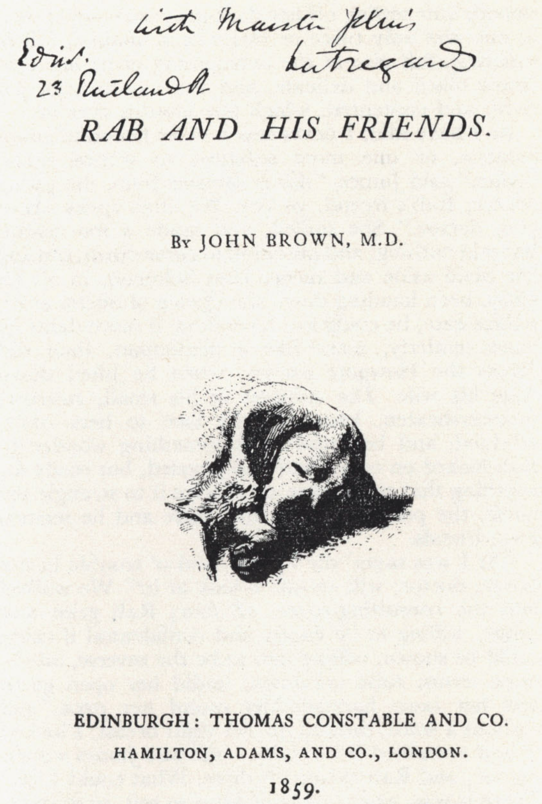
She sang bits of old songs and Psalms, stopping suddenly, mingling the Psalms of David, and the diviner words of his Son and Lord, with homely odds and ends and scraps of ballads.

Nothing more touching, or in a sense more strangely beautiful, did I ever witness. Her tremulous, rapid, affectionate, eager Scotch voice,—the swift, aimless, bewildered mind, the baffled utterance, the bright and perilous eye; some wild words, some household cares, something for James, the names of the dead, Rab called her rapidly and in a "fremyt" voice, and he starting up, surprised, and slinking off as if he were to blame somehow, or had been dreaming he heard. Many eager questions and beseechings which James and I could make nothing of, and on which she seemed to set her all and then sink back ununderstood. It was very sad, but better than many things that are not called sad. James hovered about, put out and miserable, but active and exact as ever; read to her, when there was a lull, short bits from the Psalms, prose and meter, chanting the latter in his own rude and serious way, showing great knowledge of the fit words, bearing up like a man, and doating over her as his "ain Ailie." "Ailie, ma woman!" "Ma ain bonnie wee dawtie!"

The end was drawing on: the golden bowl was breaking; the silver cord was fast being loosed—that *animula, blandula, vagula, hospes, comesque,* was about to flee. The body and the soul—companions for sixty years—were being sundered, and taking leave. She was walking, alone, through the valley of that shadow, into which one day we must all enter,—and yet she was not alone, for we know whose rod and staff were comforting her.

One night she had fallen quiet, and as we hoped, asleep; her eyes were shut. We put down the gas, and sat watching her. Suddenly she sat up in bed, and taking a bed-gown which was lying on it rolled up, she held it eagerly to her breast,—to the right side. We could see her eyes bright with a surprising tenderness and joy, bending over this bundle of clothes. She held it as a woman holds her sucking child; opening out her night-gown impatiently, and holding it close, and brooding over it, and murmuring foolish little words, as over one whom his mother comforteth, and who is sucking, and being satisfied. It was pitiful and strange to see her wasted dying look, keen and yet vague—her immense love. "Preserve me!" groaned James, giving way. And then she rocked back and forward, as if to make it sleep, hushing it, and wasting on it her infinite fondness. "Wae's me, doctor: I declare she's thinkin' it's that bairn." "What bairn?" "The only bairn we ever had; our wee Mysie, and she's in the Kingdom, forty years and mair." It was plainly true: the pain in the breast, telling its urgent story to a bewildered, ruined brain; it was misread and mistaken; it suggested to her the uneasiness of a breast full of milk, and then the child; and so again once more they were together, and she had her ain wee Mysie in her bosom.

This was the close. She sunk rapidly; the delirium left her; but as she whispered, she was clean silly; it was the lightening before the final darkness. After having for some time lain still—her eyes shut, she


RAB AND HIS FRIENDS.

By JOHN BROWN, M.D.

EDINBURGH: THOMAS CONSTABLE AND CO.

HAMILTON, ADAMS, AND CO., LONDON.

1859.

FIG. 2. Title page of Dr. Cushing's copy of the original edition of "Rab." Courtesy of the Chief Librarian, Harvey Cushing Collection, Yale Medical Library.

said "James!" He came close to her, and lifting up her calm, clear, beautiful eyes, she gave him a long look, turned to me kindly but shortly, looked for Rab but could not see him, then turned to her husband again, as if she would never leave off looking, shut her eyes and composed herself. She lay for some time breathing quick, and passed away so gently, that when we thought she was gone, James, in his old-fashioned way, held the mirror to her face. After a long pause, one small spot of dimness was breathed out; it vanished away, and never returned, leaving the blank clear darkness of the mirror without a stain. "What is our life? It is even a vapor, which appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away."

Rab all this time had been full awake and motionless: he came forward beside us: Ailie's hand, which James had held, was hanging down; it was soaked with tears; Rab licked it all over carefully, looked at her, and returned to his place under the table.

CONCLUSION

It was after witnessing the similar agony of a Highland woman while he was a medical student, that James Simpson rushed from the room in horror, to seek employment as a writer's clerk. Simpson returned and gave mankind the blessing of chloroform anesthesia. It has been said that Joseph Lister, who was a close friend of Brown's, may have had his thoughts turned even more firmly towards the problems of septic infection after a recital or reading of "Rab." In any event, the poignant presentation of Ailie's sufferings left its indelible stamp on the mind of many physicians.

John Brown died on 11 May 1882. His loss was lamented on 2 continents. As a mourner said of Chopin when the virtuoso died, "he was as pure as a tear"; and this was true of John Brown. The original manuscript of *Rab and His Friends* was purchased at auction by Sir William Osler, and donated by him and other colleagues and admirers to the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, of which Doctor Brown had once been president.